

GREEK and ROMAN VASES

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Reprint of the

BULLETIN of the MUSEUM OF ART

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN

VOL. XXVII NO. 3 DECEMBER, 1939

REPRINTED 1951

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ONE of the most important revolutions in European history, and certainly the most decisive in ancient Greek history, occurred about 700 B.C. In order to understand its significance, and especially in order to appreciate the full beauty of the vases in the Museum which so vividly portray this revolution, it is necessary to emphasize that the wonderful manifestation of the human spirit known as Hellenism, or Greek civilization, did not develop in a day. In the period before Schliemann it was the fashion to imagine that European history commenced with the Iron Age and the coming of the Greeks (about 1100 B.C.), but we now know that almost 1000 years before this the Greeks had begun to penetrate the Balkan peninsula in successive waves from the North, bringing to its height the marvelous Bronze Age civilization of Mycenae and Tiryns, though they destroyed the even greater center at Cnossus in Crete. This civilization of the second millennium before Christ is famous for its great palaces, for its amazing metal work, for its vivid frescoes and the naturalistic designs of its pottery, but internal decay, no less than the movements of the Greek people themselves (of which the Trojan War was symptomatic), brought it to a fairly abrupt end about 1100 B.C.

The last wave of invaders belonged to the *Dorian* branch of the Greek race; they came as unlettered barbarians, but with the advantage of iron weapons and of a superior tribal organization. For several centuries after that the Greeks lived in comparative isolation, combining what was left of the prehistoric culture with their own inherent genius. Society was simple and agrarian, but this was also the time when Homer lived (850 B.C.). The pottery of his day is called *geometric* (Fig. 1), because of the zig-zags, swastikas, crosses, and maeanders that are employed in the charmingly naïve decoration. The manufacture of the pot is often superb, with a fine textile feeling in the decoration (Fig. 2); and when men and animals are drawn, they are stylized silhouettes, the whole composition being due to a tectonic principle which was innate in the Greek themselves. Some of the best geometric ware consists of great amphoras from the cemetery (Dipylon quarter) of Athens. The visitor to the Museum should pause before the geometric pottery and reflect upon the simple days of the greatest poet in history (Figs. 1-3).

The visitor should then turn to the so-called *orientalizing ware* (Fig. 4) and consider what happens to a people when the world unfolds. This brings us to the decisive revolution to which we have already alluded. Aristocracies had ruled the early Greek world—a world that consisted of many independent city-states, the typical political unit of the Greeks; stability and security were in the air, but soon aristocracy, as an institution, would be swept from the face of the earth. This was due primarily to the mistakes of the governing classes, and secondarily to new forces at work. The rise

of industry, for example, brought into existence a proletarian class, while the growth of the hoplite force meant that these middle-class foot soldiers would not be content until they, too, had a share in the government. The invention of coinage, and its introduction into an agrarian society, created a new form of wealth, independent of land, and was another threat to the power of the nobles. Unrest, then, was typical of Greece in 700 B.C., and the masses, who had never heard the word "democracy," destroyed the hated system of aristocracy by rallying round a leader. Looking ahead, we may say that one-man rule, or tyranny as the Greeks called it, was a necessary step on the road to democracy: the tyrant, understanding the basis of his power, governed in the interest of the masses, who, once their own level had been raised, could then destroy the tyrant and rule in his stead.

The most important single factor in the revolution we have just described was the widening of the Greek horizon, for it led at once to a period of questioning and to

Fig. 2 Geometric pyxis (for toilet ointments) from Athens. Late 8th century B.C. Museum of Art, Providence. Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth.





Fig. 3 Geometric crater (mixing bowl). The shape resembles sub-Mycenaean vases but the decoration illustrates the transition between the geometric and orientalizing styles (note how the decoration is being broken up into panels or metopes). 7th century B.C. Museum of Art, Providence.



those centuries of exuberant growth known as archaic Greek civilization. Colonization, commerce, and new ideas from the East were responsible for a veritable renaissance. The most dramatic and thoroughgoing revolution in the intellectual history of man, for example, was to occur when Thales substituted natural causation for the gods. As for the pottery, we have something entirely new, a strong oriental influence which displaces the old elaborate geometric style. During the seventh century before Christ we find it everywhere in the Greek world, but especially at *Rhodes* (Fig. 4) and *Corinth* and other places along the great trade-routes from Asia Minor to the West. In many ways this orientalizing ware is the most appealing that the Greeks have bequeathed to posterity: its exuberant decorativeness, the lotus flowers and winged lions, the processions of deer and other animals, the terrifying gorgons, the grand colors are a sheer delight to the beholder.

As in sculpture, so in pottery the Greeks were quick to absorb foreign influences and to develop their own national style. Thus, in the course of the seventh century, there arose the famous black-figured style (Figs. 5-11). Put briefly, the technique was as follows. After the vase had been shaped on the wheel and had been allowed to dry, the surface was polished in preparation for the decoration. The figure was now drawn in outline and then filled in with a black varnish, thus presenting a black silhouette against the red background, which in reality is merely the natural color of the clay slightly tinted by a transparent wash. Other colors — white, purple, red, brown — might be added to the figure; the inner lines would be marked by incision, and so, too, would be the outlines of figures where they crossed one another. The firing in the oven added a lustre to the black glaze. The very best artists did not hesitate to decorate vases, so that during the archaic period the pottery reveals the best in archaic Greek art; indeed, so proud was the potter of his work (and the painter, too, if potter and painter were not the same man) that he frequently signed his named to the finished product — witness our amphora signed by the master Nicosthenes (Fig. 11).

The shapes of the vases show the varied needs of the Greeks — for most of the vases were for ordinary household use — and attest the potter's ability to satisfy those needs. A common shape was the *amphora* (Fig. 8), chiefly used for holding water; the *hydria* was also a water jar, while the *crater* (Fig. 9) was used for mixing wine and water. The *cylix* (Fig. 10), or drinking cup, was as popular as it is graceful; a plastic form of drinking-horn was the *rhyton* (Fig. 17). The *oenochoe* (Fig. 5), or wine-jug, has a delicate shape. For the cooling of wine the Greeks had the *psycter*; for toilet ointments the *pyxis* (Fig. 7) and *alabastron*; for oil the *aryballus* and *lecythus* (Fig. 6). In a special class were the Panathenaic amphoras which, filled with oil, were given as prizes to the victors in the mid-summer Athenian festival.

The black-figured technique held sway throughout most of the sixth century. Under Peisistratus, the great Athenian tyrant who raised his city to the front rank in contemporary Greece, all the arts were patronized, and in particular beautiful vases, filled with fine Attic oil, were exported far and wide. Nicosthenes, Execias, and Amais were the leading artists of the day, and they loved to decorate their pots with narrative scenes, with stories of Theseus and the Minotaur, and other popular tales. As a result of Greek exports there developed in Etruria an interesting ware



Fig. 5 Oenochoe (wine-jug).
Chalcidian style. 7th century B.C.
Two cocks. Between them is an
addorsed palmettelotus. Museum
of Art, Providence.

Fig. 6 Attic black-figured lecy-
thus (oil-jug). Accessories in red
and white, with skilful use of
incised lines for details. Europa
on the bull and Hermes. 6th cen-
tury B.C. Museum of Art, Provi-
dence. Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke.





Fig. 7 Black-figured pyxis. Second quarter of 6th century B.C. Museum of Art, Providence.

Fig. 8 Attic black-figured amphora (water-jar). Some details in red and white. Triptolemus with Persephone and Demeter. 6th cent. B.C. Museum of Art, Providence. →





Fig. 9 Attic black-figured column-crater (mixing bowl). Details in red and white with a skilful use of incised lines. Note the ivy-leaf and tongue-patterns. Apotheosis of Heracles. Iolaus stands to the left. Heracles, wearing a lion's skin, steps into the chariot. Athena, wearing the aegis, faces Heracles and behind her stands the red-bearded Dionysus. At the right is Apollo playing the lyre. 6th century B.C. Museum of Art, Providence.



Fig. 10 Eye cylix (drinking cup) from Etruria. Attic black-figured style. Details in red and white with considerable use of incised line technique. Silens and Maenads. 6th century B.C. Museum of Art, Providence. Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke.

called *bucchero*, whose black lustre is due to mixture with charcoal and to polishing.

About 530 B.C. arose the red-figured technique (Figs. 12-15), a style that was to dominate Greek vases for many generations to come and in after ages was to inspire poets of other lands. Red figures now appear against a black background and exhibit some of the finest free-hand drawing in the history of art. The various stages in the decoration were these. First of all, the painter sketched his figure with a dull-pointed instrument on the clay. He then painted this outline *on the outside* and thus obtained a red silhouette, for, as in the case of the black-figured style, the vase had already received a transparent wash. The details of muscles and drapery were drawn in relief-lines, and the whole background was painted with a black varnish. Finally, the pot was fired.

The names of the great Attic masters who carried on the tradition are legion: Andocides, Epictetus, Euphronius, Euthymides, Duris, Brygus, Meidias, and a host of



Fig. 11 Black-figured amphora (water-jar). Signed by the Attic master Nicosthenes. Accessories in red and white with a sparing, but telling use of incised line technique for details. Two horsemen and youths. 6th century B.C. Museum of Art, Providence.

others who are known to us only by their works. We can follow them through the so-called *severe style* into the *fine style* of the second half of the fifth century. Their chief interest lies in everyday life, though mythological subjects are still popular, but, above all, the draughtsmanship is superb and is infused with a quiet and wonderful simplicity. Of all the red-figured vases in the Museum the one which interests us most probably the late archaic *Providence Painter Vase* (480 B.C. Figs. 13, 14); as its name implies, it is famous throughout the civilized world. The unknown, but active artist has here portrayed a scene that is common enough on Attic vases: Apollo Citharoedus is pouring a libation; with him is a woman with an oenochoe. Presumably she has previously filled the god's phiale with the wine for the libation. To quote Beazley of Oxford University: "The excellent artist with whom this chapter may conclude stands midway between the painters of large pots and the painters of





Fig. 13 Attic red-figure amphora (water-jar), with twisted handles. Severe style (c. 480 B.C.). This is the so-called Providence Painter Vase. Apollo Citharoedus pouring libation. He wears a long chiton, with a himation of heavier material fastened at the right shoulder with a brooch. Museum of Art, Providence. Gift of Mr. Gustav Radeke.



Fig. 14 Detail of Apollo from the Providence Painter Vase.

small: for although he painted a number of larger vases, his works are chiefly Nolan aphoras and lecythi. His style is derived from that of the Berlin Painter. It lacks the Berlin Painter's peculiar charm: it is prose to the other's poetry, but sober, honest, often noble prose with a masculine beauty of its own. Let him be called the Providence Painter after the large neck-amphora with twisted handles, formerly in the Basseggio and Jekyll collections, and now in Providence." Miss Richter of the Metropolitan Museum says that the Providence Painter's "figures have a quiet solemnity and statuesque quality," and certainly that is true of our Apollo.

During the fifth century Athenian artists also used white as a background for their vases; there is the same wonderful drawing, with a tendency toward polychromy. We catch charming scenes of happy family life at Athens, but the most famous type of vase is the white-ground lecythus, which was placed on the graves of the dead. A lovely vase in the Museum shows Charon (Fig. 16), the dread boatman of the Styx, arriving for a passenger.

During this great fifth century the Greeks perfected in endless variety the republican



Fig. 15 Attic red-figure lebes gamikos (marriage bowl) with lid. Fine style (c. 440 B.C.). In the center, a woman and two youths in conversation. On the foot, a woman flees before Poseidon. Museum of Art, Providence. Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radek.

Fig. 16 Attic white-ground lecythus (to be placed on a grave). Polychrome decoration (late 5th century B.C.). Charon, the boatman of the Styx, arrives for a passenger. Museum of Art, Providence.





Fig. 17 Apulian rhyton (drinking-horn) in form of a bull's head. Details in red, yellow, white and black. The garlanded satyr holds a thyrsos in his right hand, a tambourine in his left. 4th century B.C. Museum of Art, Providence.

form of government, their most precious contribution to mankind. It was, too, the century of Pericles and Empire, so that inevitably the major arts of architecture and sculpture attracted the best artists of the day. As a result, Greek vases lose their vitality and their interest; nevertheless, the small, subtropical, barren, mountainous, and incredibly beautiful peninsula had created an art that ever since has been a delight to the mind and the eye.

Attic vases, we have said, were exported far and wide; for example, to the Crimea where a large number of vases has been found in a necropolis near Kertch; the gilding and use of white in the decoration are typical of the fourth century. On the other hand, Attic export to southern Italy led to local imitation during the fourth century. The so-called Nolan amphorae of Attica influenced the pottery of Campania, which is often striking with its yellows, reds, purples, and whites, though generally the drawing is careless. Most important of all the South Italian wares is the *Apulian* (Fig. 17), where once again we note the careless drawing, the use of white, and the love

of floral ornaments. Eros was a popular subject on these vases, but most popular of all were scenes from tragedy and comedy.

The fourth century is one of the most interesting periods in Greek history, for we are able to watch the apparent disintegration of society. The collapse (404 B.C.) of the Athenian Empire disillusioned men; the symbol of authority, continuity, and security was gone; and man, thrown back on his own insufficient resources in a complex changing world, felt lost. The individual was in revolt against the group; Greece was held in an economic depression, which constant warfare made worse; and many people were convinced that the only hope lay in communism. It was also a century of great thinkers — witness Plato and Aristotle — but perhaps the most significant factor of the day was the vast evolution which was slowly preparing man for a system of world politics and a cosmopolitan culture. This was realized under Alexander the Great, the most important European in history. That he was a great general is true;

but of utmost significance is his great dream of the brotherhood of man, a dream that has attracted a few persons ever since and has found its finest expression in St. Paul's wonderful vision of a world in which there shall be "neither Greek nor Jew, Barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free."

Alexander altered the course of history itself; the new common culture which he bequeathed to western Asia Hellenized Rome and served as the vehicle of Christianity. The Hellenistic Age, as the three centuries after Alexander (died 323 B.C.) are called, is remarkable for many things, especially perhaps for the high standard of living of the ordinary man. Thus we can understand the lack of fine ceramics, for they were driven from the market by the demand for silver plate. The poor person had to content himself with vases which imitated metal technique. The new style is best seen in the *Megarian* bowls from the third century. The red clay was covered with a lustrous black varnish, which was decorated with epic scenes. This technique was further developed in Italy at Arezzo and reached its height in the days of Augustus, roughly in the decades before and after the birth of Christ. *Arretine* (Fig. 18) pottery was generally made in moulds, the fine red of the clay being heightened by a red glaze. The designs of the reliefs are often superb, not at all unworthy of the mighty Roman Empire which for two hundred years brought the blessings of peace to the civilized world.

The collection of Greek and Roman vases in the Rhode Island School of Design exhibits a wide variety of periods and types and contains many choice specimens as well; it has been ably published by Stephen Bleecker Luce in a fascicule of the *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*, where a good bibliography will be found.

Fig. 18 Arretine bowl from Syria. 1st century A.D. The thin lustrous, red glaze over the reddish buff clay has a decoration in relief of alternating acanthus and palm-leaves, with a scallop-shell pattern above. Museum of Art, Providence. Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke.



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